Boston College Environmental Affairs Law Review

Volume 2 | Issue 1 Article 4

5-1-1972

Cultural Influences on Landscape Aesthetics: Some Comparisons Between Scandinavia and Northwestern North America

David R. Klein

CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON LANDSCAPE AESTHETICS: SOME COMPARISONS BETWEEN SCANDINAVIA AND NORTHWESTERN NORTH AMERICA

*By David R. Klein**

Who appreciates a particular landscape? Is it the people who live upon it, those who visit it, or perhaps those who understand its cultural or ecological history? Is a natural landscape "better," "more desirable," of "greater quality," or in some way superior to an altered landscape? Can man and his works be part of a natural landscape? What are unique elements in a landscape? Is the past worth preserving? If so, to what extent? These are only a few of the questions that must be answered if priorities are to be set whereby land will continue to be a positive force in man's aesthetic stimulation.

Throughout North America and Europe there is unending discussion about environmental quality, and there is, of course, general agreement on the desirability of maintaining or enhancing such quality. There is not, however, universal agreement on what constitutes quality in the environment. One's judgments as to quality necessarily reflect the nature of his value system. Value may be represented in dollars and cents or in non-monetary criteria such as aesthetic, cultural, or historical worth. The quality of a work of architecture, for example, is often determined by the money and entrepreneurial efforts that have been expended upon it. Yet, buildings and landscapes may also be venerated simply because they communicate history. One can appreciate that they are not readily duplicated and that a component of their beauty is their reflection of the passage of time.

The natural landscape, however, is too often taken for granted, and particularly so in frontier areas, such as portions of the western United States and northern Canada, where there remain large

expanses of undisturbed landscape. Our indifference is simply a function of our failure to understand the uniqueness of natural ecological systems. We cannot comprehend how complex and time-consuming a job it is to "make" a natural landscape. It requires only a few years to build the largest buildings, construct the highest dams, or to span the widest rivers, and the United States fulfilled its objective of putting man on the moon in less than a decade; but it took millions of years to "build" the Grand Canyon and thousands are required to produce a mature redwood forest.[1] It is obvious that man's time frame is micro-scopic in contrast to Nature's. With such a limited perspective it is not surprising that we fail to appreciate the dynamics of ecology, despite the recent incorporation of this word into our household vocabulary.

In the western world, because of our preoccupation with economics, too often we tend to associate value with money. As an example, if land is not readily developable, it follows within such a value system that it will be held in low regard except for purposes of speculation. It is the norm that land be appraised only for its potential dollar return and not for its noncommercial value to mankind. This attitude appears to be at the base of our emerging land dilemma. Americans have lost their traditional ties to the land in their accelerated evolution from a relatively stationary agrarian people to a highly mobile industrial society.

Understanding ecology and acknowledging its relevance to man, however, does not mean that man must somehow stop tampering with nature. Man is very much a part of the environment and his physical presence there inevitably will cause some modification or change. A "quality" environment is often more than just the undisturbed natural environment. But the evidences of man in the environment should reflect his understanding of his rightful place therein. Enhancing the quality of the environment need not result only from the conscious efforts of man. It may be accidental or coincidental. For example, a farm building constructed in the conventional manner of an area or a well-built log cabin in the Northwoods are often compatible with their respective surroundings, because they are the products of long periods of trial and development and because they make effective use of native materials to fulfill utilitarian purposes. When such structures have aged and weathered their beauty is increased because of their apparent assimilation into the landscape. Also with time, the surrounding forests "compensate" for the openings made by man, as the trees of the

forest edge respond to the increased light and become foliated nearly to the ground. Such openings take on a "natural" or "no longer disturbed" appearance. Finally, the very appearance of age would seem to command a subconscious respect in the observer since that appearance calls to mind man's historical attachment to the area. To be able to visualize ties with historical man, whether it be in the recent or ancient past, is to be able to appreciate more deeply one's heritage.

Where one may rely on tradition, such as regional farm architecture, he may build aesthetically into the environment with relative ease. In the case of farm buildings and log cabins, their structure may be dependent upon a thorough knowledge of the evolution of local design. Such design is not mere fortuity, but the result of deliberative action by earlier inhabitants to build into these structures characteristics reflective of their personal needs, their native materials, and their climate and terrain.[2] (See Figure 1.) Unfortunately, however, too often such deliberation is absent from modern man's new activities in new environments.

Agricultural activity upon the landscape tends particularly to foster an appreciation by the viewer of the mutually restorative relationship of man with the land.[3] The abuse of that relationship, however, is strikingly manifest in several forms, such as erosion, unconsolidated accumulation of rubbish, quarries, and strip mines.[4] Increasingly these visually offensive forms replace once prevalent pastoral scenes. Cultural landscapes of long tradition are being lost at a rapid rate throughout the world as land-use patterns undergo change imposed by developments in agricultural technology and the pressures of expanding human populations.[5] Throughout much of Scandinavia the pastoral landscape is disappearing as more and more subsistence farms are abandoned and forests take over.[6] (See Figure 2.) While the abandonment of marginal farm lands and their afforestation may be desirable in some cases from an economic and social welfare view point, many Scandinavians also value the pastoral landscape for its aesthetic worth. As a consequence, while certain branches of government encourage subsistence farmers to move to industrial areas where labor is in demand and while they subsidize the afforestation of unused farm lands, other efforts in government are directed toward preserving the historical landscape.[7]

The pastoral or "grazing" landscape of the Scandinavian region has been maintained in the past by heavy grazing of cattle, sheep,

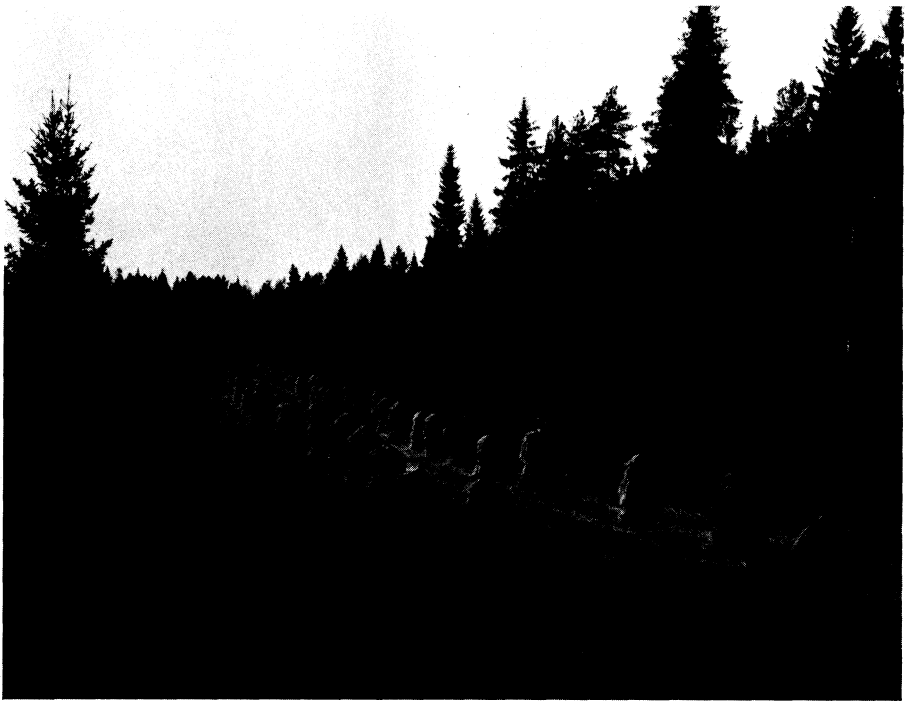

FIGURE 1

A farm clearing in the coniferous forest of northern Sweden and the weathered hay storage shed of native materials foster an appreciation by the viewer for the close relationship of man to the environment. Historically, man's activities in this forest monotype have created ecological diversity.

and horses, plus cultivation of crops on the less rocky sites. This type of subsistence farming has a long tradition and, in terms of high production agriculture on the North American continent, it can be considered misuse of the land. Generally there is no supplemental fertilization of grazed areas in addition to the excrements of the grazing animals; the soil is shallow and rocky and often has a high clay content. Nitrogen and phosphorus in the soil are usually below standards for crop production.[8] Productivity from the land is low both in plant and animal matter. In drier or windier climates, severe erosion tends to follow such land-use practices, as has been the case in western North America, North Africa, the Middle East, China, and in many other parts of the world.[9] In most of Scandinavia, a moist climate, the shelter of the surrounding forests, and the protection of the ground cover provided by the winter snows (livestock must be quartered in barns and fed hay

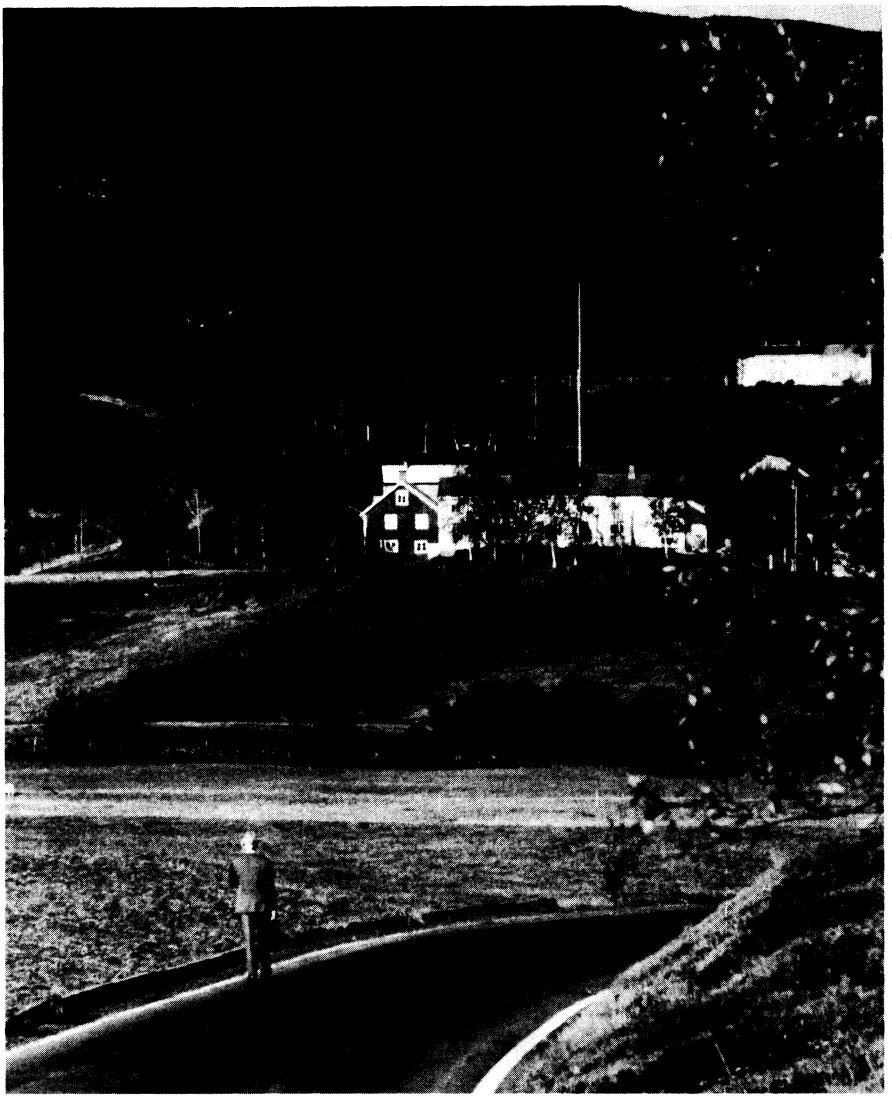

FIGURE 2

The pastoral landscape in many areas of Norway and Sweden is being lost at an accelerating rate as industrialization draws people from the land. This pastoral secene is in Nord Trøndelag, Norway.

during winter) virtually eliminate the threat of soil erosion. On the other hand, the aesthetic effect of this type of land use is very pleasing. In spring, the park-like vistas are colored by a diverse array of flowers. Artificial fertilization will increase the productivity of these lands, but it will destroy much of their beauty be-

cause the increased soil fertility favors grasses, which crowd out the annual and perennial flowering plants.[10] Ecological diversity is then lost.

Some woody plants, such as solitary juniper shrubs and hardwood trees with fully foliated crowns, remain scattered throughout the fields——the former because of their resistance to grazing by cattle and the latter because of special protection by farmers. In the past oak was favored as an open grown tree because its acorns were used for animal food. Moreover, oak, birch, and other hardwoods were valued for special uses such as the building of boats, wagons, and sleds, and the creation of tools and utensils. Farmers allowed these desired trees to become established by fencing certain areas from grazing long enough for the young trees to grow above the reach of grazing livestock.

In order to preserve the pastoral landscape for its cultural significance and its aesthetic value, research efforts through the Institute of Economic Botany at Uppsala, Sweden, are directed toward increasing the efficiency and economy of cattle and sheep farming.[11] The objective is to provide economic incentive for farmers to stay on the land. It is recognized that loss of the pastoral landscape, apart from its cultural and aesthetic significance, will mean the loss of certain plant and animal associations that are unique to this ecological type. Wildlife such as the roe deer, hedgehog, badger, wood pigeon and many song birds found there are bound in the local traditions and folklore. The "edge effect," which is a product of the field and forest interface, is important to these wildlife species.[12]

The effort to maintain the grazing landscape in Sweden is analogous in some ways to recent attitudes toward clear-cutting of mature forests in northwestern North America.[13] (See Figure 3.) Foresters, because of their training, look upon "over-mature" forests as wasteful and inefficient use of the land, while second-growth stands of trees, with their more uniform lighter green color, represent to them more efficient land use. In the latter, board feet produced per acre per year is greatly in excess of that in the over-mature forests where growth just replaces loss through decay and the total marketable board feet of timber is less than will be available when the second-growth even-aged stands reach merchantable size.[14] Foresters often argue that to them second-growth forests are aesthetically more pleasing than the over-mature virgin forests. This attitude reflects the conventional emphasis of forestry training

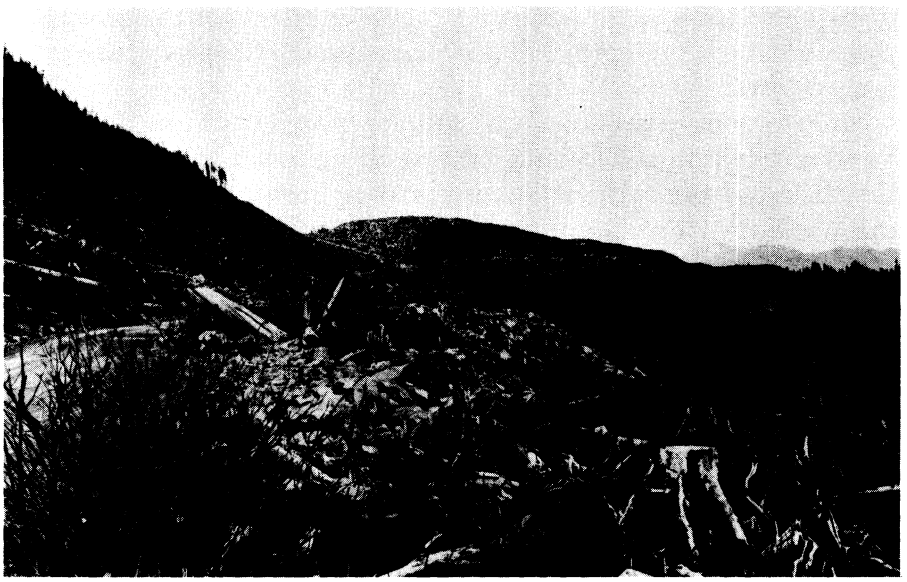

FIGURE 3

A clear cutting in virgin Sitka spruce—western hemlock forest in southeastern Alaska. To the forester such a landscape represents the first step in the "rejuvenation" of the land which was previously occupied by the "over-mature and decadent" virgin forest. To the conservationist-aesthete the scene is an offensive disfiguration of the land. Photo by H. Merriam.

on productivity of the land for utilitarian purposes, and it confuses the conceptual bases of beauty with those of utility. Psychologists and aestheticians agree that beauty is rooted in sensual pleasure and that conceptions of beauty are metaphorical extensions of the experience of sensory gratification.[15] Beauty, therefore, is an end in itself and needs no excuse for being, while utility is the means for the attainment of something else. Many conservation-oriented people outside of the forestry profession, however, see beauty in the old, virgin forests and are offended by the geometrical, patchwork appearance of logged areas and the uniformity of the second-growth trees. Among at least some of these conservationists, aesthetic appreciation of the climax forest may also reflect a cultural bias which results from a "purist" ideology, that the environment, undisturbed by man, is more desirable than the disturbed environment. Cultural biases, therefore, exist both among the foresters and the conservationists, but in opposite directions and often with entirely different motivating bases.

As to the pastoral landscape in much of Scandinavia, however,

we find the situation somewhat reversed, in that there an ecologist, agronomist or soils expert appraising the situation would most likely find the grazing landscape offensive to "what his training tells him." The abundance of herbs, the absence of shrubs, and the apparent lack of forest regeneration all may be technically undesirable.[16] The high herb/low grass ratio is symptomatic of the overgrazing that has taken place on naturally poor soils without the addition of fertilizers, and from the professional view point these lands would be "better off" in forest. The absence of shrubs and lack of forest regeneration reflect the failure of the forests to reproduce themselves[17] and in terms of the most efficient productivity of the land it might be better to let it return to forest and grow wood. The pastoral landscape can then be looked upon as poor use of the land and, from that point of view, undesirable. The point here, however, is that the grazing landscape has beauty as a *result* of these so-called abuses of the land. The pattern of use of the land has created the ecological diversity which is the basis of its beauty. Ironically, fertilization would reduce the complex of flowering plants and increase the grasses.[18] Allowing the forest to regenerate would eliminate the openings which provide the vistas necessary to achieve the park-like appearance and the open setting for the farm buildings, specimen trees, domestic animals, and fully foliated trees of the forest which face the field edge. It is apparent that conflicts exist between cultural attitudes and scientific training in this situation. A person's profession and way of life obviously influence his attitude toward the land. Farmers tend to respect the land because it is the apparent source of their livelihood. Miners often deface the land in their efforts to reach what lies underneath its surface. This activity is unlikely to foster respect for values of the land surface. Engineers and construction workers may look upon nature as an obstacle to their work. Trees are cut to make way for roads and other works of man, rivers are to be bridged or dammed, climatic extremes are to be ameliorated through construction of suitable shelters for man, and hills are to be lowered or tunnelled.

With such a wide divergence in attitudes about land values, who is to decide the highest priority of use for a given piece of land: those who appreciate its aesthetic worth independent of utility, or those who recognize its potential for productivity? If we relegate to a low priority the concept of greatest efficiency of productivity of the land for the benefit of man and place beauty first, is this in conflict with an increasingly more crowded planet with greater

and greater demands being placed on the land to meet the "needs" of the expanding population? All too frequently, relative values of the land are couched in such phraseology, so that aesthetic value is made to appear as a nonessential luxury that must yield to the material demands of an affluent society. Beauty, however, is a legitimate product of the landscape and should be more easily justified as essential to man's well-being and to quality in life than a second TV set, a power lawn mower, or an electric can opener. Although the importance of beauty to human existence is a common subject of the classic literature, modern man all too often loses sight of aesthetics in his devotion to economics. In spite of the obviously justified, humanitarian pleas for increased availability of food stuffs for the undernourished peoples of the world, "man cannot live by bread alone." Man only too readily alters his environment, but he cannot remove himself from environmental influences. He is, in spite of himself, a product of the environment he creates. If landscape values are inevitably sacrificed to make way for the so-called "essential" works of man, will not the cultural degeneration of man follow close behind?

FOOTNOTES

* Visiting Professor of Ecology, University of Oslo (Norway); Professor of Wildlife Management and Leader, Alaska Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit, University of Alaska.

[1] D. C. Miller, "Last Stand of the Giants," NATIONAL WILDLIFE, 3:1, pp. 12–15 (1965).

[2] A. Rapoport, HOUSE FORM AND CULTURE (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1969), and B. Rudofsky, ARCHITECTURE WITHOUT ARCHITECTS (New York: Doubleday, 1964).

[3] For an excellent discussion of man's changing attitudes toward the landscape see P. Shepard, MAN IN THE LANDSCAPE (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967).

[4] F. F. Darling, "The Impact of Man on His Environment," Second Reith Lecture 1969, Published in F. F. Darling, WILDERNESS AND PLENTY, pp. 18–36 (London: Ballantine Books, Ltd., 1970).

[5] See UNESCO, USE AND CONSERVATION OF THE BIOSPHERE, particularly pp. 31–46 (Liege, Belgium: Vaillant-Carmanne, S.A., 1970).

[6] I. Ahlen, "Landskapets Utnyttjande och Faunan," SVERIGES NATUR, ARSBOK, pp. 73–99 (1966).

[7] The National Environmental Protection Board, Protection of Environment in Sweden (Solna, Sweden: Planning Secretariat, 1969),

and Ministry of Local Government and Labour, SURVEY OF NORWEGIAN PLANNING LEGISLATION AND ORGANIZATION (Oslo: Fellestrykk, 1970).

[8] See papers in B. E. Berglund (ed.), IMPACT OF MAN ON THE SCANDINAVIAN LANDSCAPE DURING THE LATE POST-GLACIAL OIKOS, Supplementum 12 (1969). Relevant papers are: N. Malmer, "Organic Matter and Cycling of Minerals in Virgin and Present Ecosystems," pp. 79–86; M. Fries, "Aspects of Floristic Changes in Connection with the Development of the Cultural Landscape," pp. 29–34.

[9] See UNESCO, *supra* note 5.

[10] See B. E. Berglund, *supra* note 8, and I. Ahlen, *supra* note 6.

[11] Discussion with Dr. E. Steen, Institute of Economic Botany, Uppsala, Sweden.

[12] I. Ahlen, *supra* note 6.

[13] See Senate Document No. 91–115, A UNIVERSITY VIEW OF THE FOREST SERVICE, a report of A Select Committee of the University of Montana for the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, U.S. Senate, 1970, also R. W. Behan, "The Succotash Syndrome, or Multiple Use: A Heartfelt Approach to Forest Land Management," NATURAL RESOURCES JOURNAL, 7:4, pp. 473–484 (1967).

[14] R. W. Behan, *supra* note 13.

[15] For an excellent discussion of beauty in relation to its psychological and cultural roots see R. G. Collingwood, THE PRINCIPLES OF ART (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938).

[16] B. E. Berglund, *supra* note 8 at 29–34, and E. Steen, *supra* note 11.

[17] I. Ahlen, *supra* note 6.

[18] B. E. Berglund, *supra* note 8.